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Colorado Springs Independent

Reading between the lines

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By Rich Tosches

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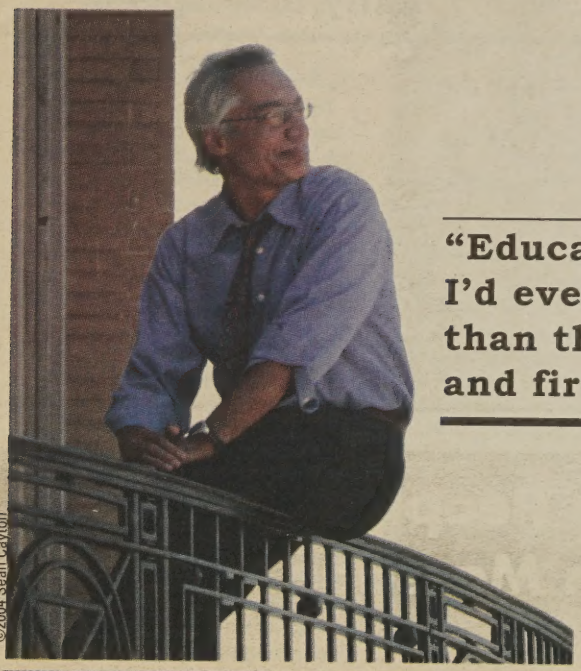
Reading between the lines

Library director Jose Aponte lights off a pack of firecrackers

By Rich Tosches



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Pikes Peak Library boss Jose Aponte, bicyclist extraordinaire, lover of the earth, frothing-at-the-mouth 25-year Democratic activist, a volunteer presidential campaign worker for none other than George McGovern, for crying out loud, found himself mingling with very strange company.

"Education is no less important, I'd even say more important, than the protection our police and fire departments provide."

First, in 2002, Aponte was appointed to the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries. Then, as if that wasn't enough to make Jimmy Carter gasp and briefly stop building homes for the poor and Bill Clinton's eyebrows go the opposite direction from his trousers, in January of this year Aponte was appointed to a prestigious national library commission by — yipes — President George W. Bush.

So what's a nice Democrat doing in a joint like that?

Aponte says it's all about getting more done from the inside. Here's how he put it:

"Lyndon Johnson said you can accomplish much more pissing inside the tent than you can by standing outside and pissing *on* the tent."

Which tells you two things:

1. Aponte is an intriguing figure, with a passion for education, who wants to be a player when it comes to reform.

2. You probably don't want to invite him along on your next camping trip.

As his terrific little Lyndon Johnson story indicates, Aponte is passionate about change in this country, about addressing school dropout rates and fighting to find solutions, about labor issues that leave minorities behind. About doing the right

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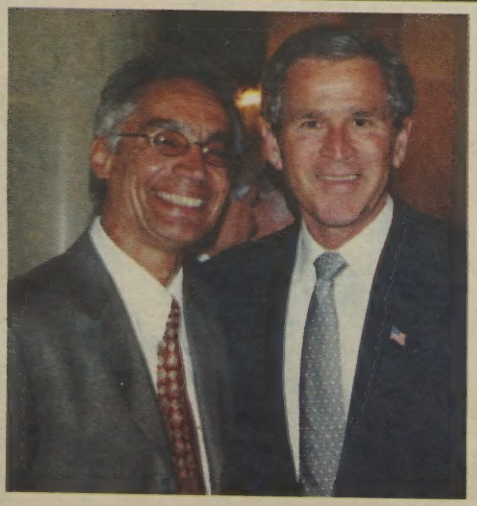
José Aponte in the recently renovated 1905 Carnegie Library in downtown Colorado Springs.

Aponte, shown here with the First Lady, was appointed to the Laura Bush Foundation for America's libraries in 2002.



George W. Bush appointed Aponte to the national library commission in January.

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Aponte calls the sensation of riding his bike to work and back home his "rebirth."

"The bike gets me back in contact with the earth. I'm looking for foxes and bear and elk. I love the planet. I love the green. I love the seasons. And I really love speed."

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thing. If he has to mingle with his 25-year adversaries, so be it.

"When those commission doors close it's just you politicking for what is right, politicking with other people," Aponte said. "The reason President Bush appointed me is to help build a consensus. Politics serves no purpose just as a show. It's all about winning. About how you make change."

A clear agenda

Sitting in his Penrose Library office downtown where he has ruled as the Pikes Peak Library District's executive director for 15 months, Aponte rattles off his views on what needs to change. His thoughts come hard and loud, like lighting off a pack of firecrackers.

"I represent the disenfranchised population in many ways," he said. "And I still have a clear political agenda. Native American reservations and the living conditions are a disgrace to this country. English as a second language is used as a labor issue in this country, not as something that can help people. We have an exploited class in America, a subclass. Education should be given the merit of public safety in our country. Education is no less important, I'd even say more important, than the protection our police and fire departments provide. It needs to be funded at that level."

So, what's with those lofty national *Republican* appointments?

Aponte pauses and gazes across the room, his eyes passing over his neatly organized desk and over to the far wall, where his $5,000 racing bicycle — he says he got it for $1,500 on e-Bay — rests.

"Democrat," he says. "How does this happen? All of a sudden you stop being who you are? The answer is I've changed. I'm now independent. I think there are still things left in the world that can be nonpartisan. That's the fun part of being on the library commission. I think education and libraries and museums need to hold to their original tenets, the basis of their origins. It's a hard struggle. So now I'm fighting from a different stance. And I've been criticized for it. But I can go both ways. I'm in it to win."

Aponte smiles.

"It's based on an enlightened self-interest, my friend," he said. "I believe in that clear agenda. I'll go both ways. I don't care. You have to be able to take the heat."

Ssshhhhhh!

The heat, of course, comes from success. In addition to being named to the first lady's library foundation and to President Bush's National Commission on Libraries and Information Services, Aponte was, in June, selected as the 2004 Trejo Librarian of the Year by REFORMA, a national affiliate of the American Library Association that promotes library services to Latinos and the Spanish-speaking community.

From REFORMA's announcement: "His outstanding library work — locally and nationwide — contributions to REFORMA, and the promotion of Latino culture makes him a model to follow by new and veteran librarians alike. He validates our belief that librarians can make a difference."

Ah, a librarian. The image, perhaps, of an older woman. Paisley dress. Reading glasses sliding down her nose. A finger to the lips. Ssshhhhh! Aponte destroys that stereotype like he once destroyed the competition in bicycle racing.

The carbon fiber Trek bicycle leaning against his office wall tells a different side of the man. He was the 2002 world

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duathlon (biking and running) champion in the 50-54 age group and was the champion on the 2002 U.S. Nationals long-course competition.

He's a veteran of many marathons, including the Boston and the Los Angeles. His bicycle-racing days, he says, are over.

Aponte and his wife, nationally known artist Cynthia Reyes, live in Chipita Park. Most days he rides the bike to work at the downtown library. Although ride might not be the right word.

"The bike," he says, glancing over at it, "goes real fast. It screams. It gives me my contact with the planet. I go to a lot of meetings and deal with a lot of politics and intellectualization. The bike gets me back in contact with the earth. I'm looking for foxes and bear and elk. I love the planet. I love the green. I love the seasons. And I really love speed. It reminds me of being a 5-year-old boy and you're just flying on your bike."

And there's another reason he rides. He explains it in the firecracker style.

"We got a house in Chipita Park so I can cycle to Woodland Park and all the way down to Deckers. I make that trip maybe three times a week. It's my rebirth. I do it because when I come back to the job, I realize some kid is going to learn to read in there, and that I have to find a way to stay open more hours and I need to make a compelling argument to the citizens around here that people need the library and people need housing and they need so many other things.

"Man, I have a responsibility. My place needs to be open. This isn't just a job. This community has invested great responsibility in me."

In March, Aponte interviewed Colorado Attorney General Ken Salazar as part of the Library District's "De donde eres" project tracing Hispanic/Latino family histories in Colorado.

Born in the South Bronx

Aponte was born in the South Bronx. His mother, Hortensia, raised Aponte and his sister, Gloria, on her own. Growing up wasn't pretty.

"My mother got us out of the city as soon as she could," Aponte said. "We moved first to north Manhattan, but one day she came home from work and found some kids, perhaps gang kids, I don't know, were holding me over a subway entrance, threatening to push me over and down onto the stairs. I was 7 or 8. My mother scared them away."

Aponte's mother was the librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library. She left that job and found another, as a librarian in upstate Albany, N.Y. There, Aponte found a different life.

"There were people there for me," he said. "People who helped. There was a running coach at school and so many others. Without a father, well, these people were my father. They looked out for me.

"So many things I did for the first time as an adult I did with our two sons. I flew a kite for the first time with my boys. I went to the circus for the first time with my boys. The first time I went to a pro basketball game was with my boys. I remember the people in Albany who helped me. And so much of what I do, what I feel, is that service commitment to other people. Very much like what Gandhi said, that I've got to give back to somebody, to give back what so many somebodies in my life gave to me to keep me in line."

Aponte earned a bachelor's degree from Bard College in New York and then he headed west. He earned a master's in library science from the University of Arizona, and spent 23 years working in libraries in Arizona, Florida and California before taking the Pikes Peak job.

He was the director of the Oceanside, Calif., public library from 1996 to 2000, and then became Deputy City Manager in Oceanside, in charge of neighborhood and community services.

In the seaside towns of Southern California — he was the San Juan Capistrano librarian for eight years — he saw problems in education. And through some of those towns' shadowy residents, he saw the beginnings of a solution.

"They were the San Juan Boys," Aponte said. "A gang? Sure. They had a business. Drugs, I suspect. And every day that I came to work at the San Juan Capistrano library I'd see them in the park across the street. I'd get to work at 7 a.m. and the San Juan Boys were there. I'd leave at 5 p.m. and they were still there. I'd forget a book or some papers and come back to the library at 9 at night, the San Juan Boys — still in that park, still doing business. Sunday, the San Juan Boys are in the park. Those kids were organized. They had an objective and they made a living and they knew exactly what it was they had to do; 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they worked at it.

"Communities have to be just as engaged. It's not a nine-to-five job on weekdays. We have to be engaged all the time. And we have to work with everybody to solve our problems.

"Not Republicans. Not Democrats. Everybody. If the library is to stay relevant we have to work as hard as the San Juan Boys. Wayne Gretzky said to skate to where the puck is, or skate to where the puck is going to be. Where the puck is going to be around here is with the working class of this community."

"English as a second language is used as a labor issue in this country, not as something that can help people."

Deal with it

Which leads to the obvious question: What brings a liberal, West Coast Democrat to a place like this?

Aponte laughs. He looks out his window. He is, quite carefully, forming an answer. And then it comes. Aponte-style.

"The challenge is what attracted me," he said. "This is without a doubt one of the

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"Native American reservations and the living conditions are a disgrace to this country."

best public libraries in the U.S. And I was on track to become a city manager in Southern California. Master's degree. Latino. I had it all. And decided I didn't like that work. I didn't like dealing with potholes and hookers. What's interesting to me are education and change and building a community."

Aponte leans back in his chair and smiles again. He hasn't, he acknowledges, really answered the question. How does such a person get to the back yard of Focus on the Family, to the home of anti-gay Amendment 2, to a community with a mayor, Lionel Rivera, who publicly dismisses classes of people based on sexual orientation (last week Mayor Rivera refused to recognize the town's Gay Pride Parade)?

Aponte takes a deep breath and offers a preface to the answer.

"I don't believe in secrets," he said. "Gandhi said secrets are the substance of psychological violence. So if people don't like what I'm about to say, if they don't agree with me, well, deal with it."

And then came the answer.

"I came here because I saw this community as a petri dish where I could apply some of my skills," Aponte said.

"Frankly, it fascinated me. I saw Focus on the Family and all that goes with that as a pretty neat challenge. I come from a pretty strong Christian tradition in my family, and I believe a spiritual and moral compass is essential to all of us. I disagree with the moral metric that determines what is right and wrong for individuals. And I'm not afraid of that discussion."

Aponte sat forward in his chair and slid closer to the table.

"I think groups like Focus on the Family have the potential of making this a truly great place," he said. "But first they have to transcend their own Byzantine kind of very parochial thinking. They have to be involved in the community. And they have to be at the table, not outside the room, not talking about just *their* ideas.

"Focus needs to take a stand on building new hospitals. On getting better healthcare for this community. About raising money for cancer research.

"We need to put the onus on them, instead of them putting the onus on everybody else. We need to knock on their door and hold their feet to the fire and ask them, 'What are you doing for healthcare? What are you doing about drug addiction and alcoholism? How are you reinvesting the hundreds of millions of dollars you generate from this community? I want to know how many hospitals you built with that money this year.'"

Teaching kids to read

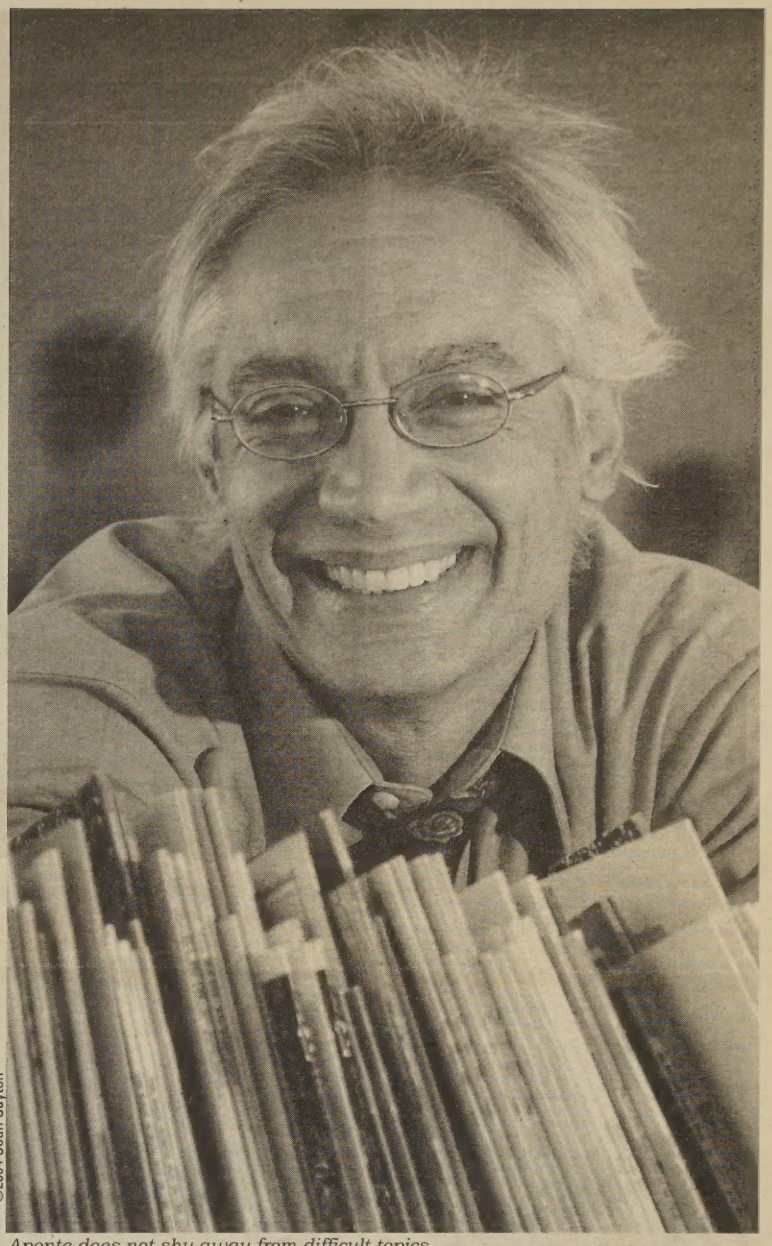
In a tremendously unsurprising bit of news, not everyone in town agrees with the views of Aponte. He keeps one of those dissenting opinions on his office telephone answering machine because, he said, "it keeps me aware."

Here's the phone message that Aponte, who is of Puerto Rican ancestry, received in February:

"You f— — —- Mexicans think you're taking over the world," the caller begins. "But you're not. The Lord says you're all gonna burn in hell. You're gonna fry in hell, you f— — —- Mexicans!"

Aponte smiles again.

"There's hate out there," he said. "All I'm talking about are the great American issues of the day, issues that are right here in our community," he said. "I'm talking about how to get a kid to learn to read and hopefully be able to get a job. I'm a public librarian." ❐



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